



WILDLIFE NOTES

THE OSPREY

Wheeling high above the clear, shallow water, a quick bird hovers, folds its wings and plunges feet-first downward. Within seconds the bird emerges, shaking excess water from its plumage, and rotates a captured fish head forward for the least wind resistance. The successful predator then circles above its feeding ground several times, slowly gains altitude, and disappears over the horizon.

This magnificent fisherman is the American osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). It looks like a smaller version of the bald eagle with a characteristic "crook" in its wings and a dark eye stripe.

Ospreys are a cosmopolitan species found in North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia. Since they live entirely on fish, ospreys naturally prefer to dwell in the vicinity of lakes, seacoasts, or rivers where they can find an abundance of prey.

Ospreys generally construct their nests in the tops of dead trees along shores. They utilize short stumps or partially submerged snags for their nests, usually at the mouth of a river or in its backwaters.

An osprey nest, three to five feet in diameter, is an ingenious accumulation of sticks, grasses, mosses, and lichens. The birds gather construction materials from the ground or snatch sticks during flight from existing dead trees. Throughout the breeding season, adult ospreys may continually add large sticks to their nests. After the young have fledged, they use nests as perches. As a result of the fledging activity, nests may become damaged and reduced in size; by autumn many nests are partially broken down, and much of the nesting material has fallen to the ground.

North American ospreys usually return to their northern breeding areas in late March and early April. The entire breeding population arrives within one to two weeks, excluding the previous season's nestlings, which remain three years at the wintering grounds.

Although ospreys mate for life, they renew their bond with courtship displays each spring. This consists largely of aerial gymnastics by both sexes, swift-pursuit aerial races, soaring, swooping, and hovering in wide circles. The male usually carries a fish in his talons and presents it to the female.

Breeding females lay two or three eggs (more rarely four) in late April or early May. Although some males assist their mates, it's usually the female that handles the 33-day incubation. The young usually hatch the first week of June and fledge sometime during the second week of August.

Throughout incubation and early stages of the brooding period, chicks are cared for by mothers; the male provides fish for his mate and developing young. If he's hungry, he eats the head and viscera



of the fish first before dropping it into the nest. After six weeks, nestlings are strong enough to stand up and feed themselves, so both parents provide food, depositing it at the nest and flying away.

While the male is fishing, the female perches at the edge of the nest or spends time rearranging nesting material. She utters shrill chirps when her mate approaches the nest with a fish. The young raise their heads to watch him as he circles and drops the fish into the nest. The male then retires to a perch where he rests and preens his feathers.

The osprey and the bald eagle are the only fish-eating North American birds that enter the water feet first. Scale-like projections on the bottom of their talons help hold the slippery fish. The osprey is almost totally dependent on fish for food; salmon, perch, trout, chubs, suckers, sunfish, catfish, and whitefish represent the various species they catch.

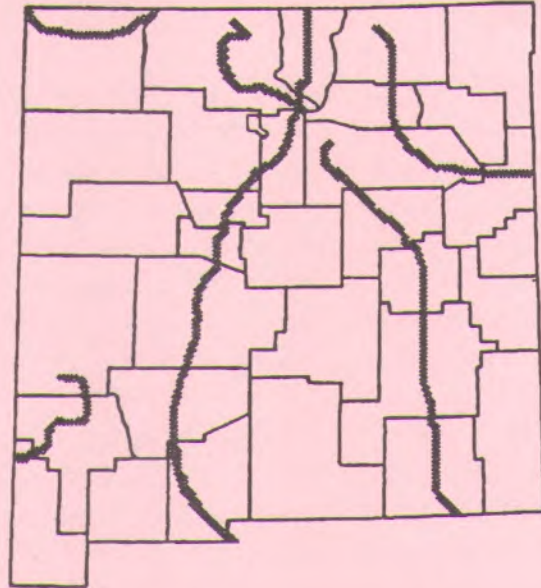
The osprey's specific fish diet almost caused its downfall. During the 1960s, scientific research was conducted nationwide regarding contamination of the bird's environment by the widely used insecticide DDT. Scientists found that hatching failure was the chief contributing factor to lowered reproductive performance in ospreys and other birds of prey. Studies indicated that the osprey's reproductive impairment was a direct result of DDT and its metabolites within the food chain. DDT is easily absorbed by most living organisms, including the osprey, from the food it eats. Since the chemical was banned in the late 1960s, however, many of the beleaguered osprey populations have made remarkable recoveries.

You can see ospreys in New Mexico from March to May as they make their way to breeding grounds further north. To date, no active osprey nests have been discovered in the state. The birds pass through New Mexico again in the fall, as early as mid-August and as late as December.

Nesting sites and uncontaminated food resources are of prime importance to the continuation of the ospreys as a species. Like any other form of wildlife, they depend on a proper and pure habitat.

Ospreys are more than just birds to be enjoyed. They're an alarm system of things gone haywire in the ecosystem of lakes and rivers. They are sensitive indicators of the environment in which we live as well.

SEASONAL RANGE MAP OF THE OSPREY



Seasonal range includes major drainages and lakes that supply fish.